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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000282

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EC

SUBJECT: GUTIERREZ (AGAIN) RECONSIDERING AMBASSADORIAL CANDIDATE

REF: A. QUITO 42

- 1B. QUITO 263
- 1C. 04 QUITO 3302
- 1D. 04 QUITO 3151

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Despite Lucio Gutierrez informing a nationwide TV audience January 3 that MFA diplomat Roberto Betancourt was his choice to head Ecuador's embassy in Washington (Ref A), the Ecuadorian president is now having second (actually, third) thoughts. At their February 3 meeting, Gutierrez told the Ambassador he understood Betancourt was not the Embassy's favorite for the U.S. mission. Anyway, the career dip was needed in Europe, where his foreign trade expertise could help resolve a difficult dispute over the EU's banana tariff policy (Ref B). Gutierrez thus had re-opened the nomination process and sought the Ambassador's input.

¶2. (C) She offered the president no names, noting the decision was his to make. If it were hers, however, the Ambassador would seek someone comfortable with Congressional caucuses, fluent in English, and connected in his home country. Gutierrez floated two possibles: former Finance Minister Mauricio Pozo and current Subsecretary of Production Patricio Johnson, the brother of MFA Vice Foreign Minister Edwin Johnson. Although Pozo was under consideration for a position at the CAF, an Andean IFI, beginning in mid-2006, he reportedly was interested in serving in Washington.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador praised Pozo's credentials and top-notch DC reputation. Even a short-term spell in Washington would benefit bilateral relations. She was pointedly silent on Johnson, whom we consider a lackluster Cabinet member. The Ambassador asked the president to keep the Embassy informed as he deliberated the selection.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Waffling over nominations ain't the Gutierrez way. Forty-plus individuals have filled Ecuador's 15 cabinet positions since the president took office, testament to his "choose first, consider later" modus operandi. Betancourt, Foreign Minister Patricio Zuquilandia's boy, was a lock for Washington one month ago yet now appears out. Three explanations for the flip-flop come easily to mind. First, as bananas are a major Ecuadorian export and most growers hail from the politically potent coastal region, it makes sense for Gutierrez to deploy an experienced trade negotiator to Europe for EU talks. Next, the president might consider the U.S. relationship so vital that it behooves Ecuador to appoint an ambassador well-liked and respected in Washington. Last (and most intriguing), the Teflon that has coated FM Zuquilandia for eighteen months might be wearing thin. A series of MFA miscues has brought Gutierrez recent grief, with media and opposition questioning the president's continued loyalty to his embattled chancellor. Betancourt's punting just might be proof that Zuquilandia has lost the boss's ear.

Kenney